

Laughter

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Summary: There was something off about Natsu's smile, and it had been months since he'd seen the Fire mage laugh and Gray was determined to do something about it. Gratsu Fluff Week 2016. Day 1 Prompt: Laughter.

Laughter

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Written for Gratsu Fluff Week 2016 on Tumblr.

Day 1 Prompt: Laughter

FTFT

Gray frowned as he stared across the guildhall at where Natsu was sat with Cana and Levy, his eyes narrowed as he studied his rival. There had been something off about the Dragon-slayer for the past couple of months and he hadn't been able to put his finger on it, but it was really beginning to get under his skin and he was determined to get to the bottom of it. He didn't like worrying about the idiot—he wanted everything to get back to their normal rivalry and antics. _I need the training—it's not because I miss him. _It sounded weak even in his own mind, and he gritted his teeth before refocusing on Natsu as the two girls had suddenly burst into laughter, and his eyes widened as realisation slammed into him.

_Natsu isn't laughing—he and Levy were practically falling out of their seats at whatever had just been said or done, but Natsu was sat there, a smile on his lips but no sign of laughter. Even the smile was fake—or rather not fake, but not a proper smile. It didn't reach the olive eyes that were watching the girls with an odd longing expression, and there was an odd edge to it, and as Gray watched it disappeared long before the other two had got their mirth

under control. _Natsuâ€|_It was only now that he was focused on it, that the Ice mage realised that he hadn't heard the Dragon-slayer laugh in monthsâ€|of course he knew whyâ€|Lisanna's death had hit the entire guild hard, but Natsu hadn't taken it the worst after Mira and Elfman of course.

It was nearly six months since she had died, and it had taken time for Natsu to start smiling again, but that had been expected. Yet it was only ever that weak smile that he had worn moments beforeâ€|once or twice they had glimpsed his old, broad grinâ€|but not once had he laughed. _How did I miss it?_ It seemed like something that should've been impossible to miss, especially given the amount of time that Gray spent around the Fire mage trying to drag him into fights, and yet somehow he had missed itâ€|although maybe that wasn't a bad thing, he amended as he felt a dull ache forming in his chest as he stared across at Natsu. _Natsuâ€|_

"What's wrong Gray?" Erza asked as she dropped into the seat beside him, and he turned to look at her for a moment seeing only genuine concern in her eyes, before he sighed and replied softly.

"Natsuâ€|"

"You're not fighting again are you?"

"Noâ€|" Gray muttered with a scowl, slightly offended that she had immediately jumped to that conclusion although she couldn't really blame her, and he sighed as it reminded him of his earlier realization that they hadn't had a proper brawl in weeks. Realising that she was staring at him in anticipation of an explanation he gestured across to Natsu. "Haven't you noticedâ€|he hasn't laughed once sinceâ€|then." He faltered slightly, unable to voice the fact that Lisanna had goneâ€|whilst he hadn't been as close to her as Natsu, he still missed her, and it was impossible not to care after seeing the changes that her death had wrought in his friends.

"Can you really blame him?" Erza asked softly, her expression darkening for a moment as her gaze strayed across to where Mira and Elfman were sat, both of the Take-over mages were doing better but they found it hard to be around the others all the time and tended to retreat at times. Blinking back the familiar stinging in her eyes she shifted her attention back to Natsu, noting that he was trying to smile at whatever Cana and Levy were saying, but unable to see past the strained edge. "I was surprised when he started smiling againâ€|I thought it would take much longer."

"But it's not a proper smile most of the time," Gray muttered, trying not to remember all the times he'd called Natsu's normal grin idiotic, at the moment he was quite willing to promise never to say that again if he could just get a proper smile from the Dragon-slayer.

"Are you actually worried about him?"

"Of courseâ€|" He couldn't meet her eyes as he replied, feeling his cheeks heating up under her knowing gaze, and he coughed awkwardly before gesturing around the guild. "The Guild doesn't feel the same with him like thisâ€|_I don't like the guild like thisâ€|_He had never thought that would be possible, remembering all their arguments

and fights, and yet as he stared across at Natsu he knew that he never wanted to imagine the guild without the Fire mageâ€¦_even if he is a flame-brained idiot._

"Oh Gray," Erza murmured with a small smile as she gazed at him, _it takes this for you to admit that your friends?_ In all honesty she had noticed that Natsu still hadn't bounced back to normal, but she had never imagined that Gray would be the first one to broach the problem, and her smile grew as realised that his face had turned an even brighter red at her words.

"I don't know how to cheer him up though," Gray muttered, his hands clenching on top of the table as he added softly. "We spend most of our time fighting. I can't even remember the last time we spoke without descending into exchanging punches." _That was a lieâ€¦_He could remember perfectly, because it had been a couple of days after Mira and Elfman had returned without Lisannaâ€¦he had got worried about the idiot and gone to track him down, finding him in the process of building a memorial for Lisanna out near the hut where they had used to play as kidsâ€¦where they had raised Happy.

_He'd already searched everywhere else he could think of, and even made the trek out to the small house that Natsu had bought on the outskirts of the town. Happy had been there on his own, clearly bearing the marks of having cried a short while before and the cat had quietly admitted that he hadn't seen Natsu since the day beforeâ€¦that the Fire mage had even asked his pseudo son to leave him alone for the time being. If Gray hadn't been worried before, he certainly was after hearing thatâ€¦However, at least Happy had given him a lead on where he might find the Dragon-slayer as the Ice mage had completely forgotten about the hut that Lisanna and Natsu had built together. _

He was relieved to spot the distinctive head of sakura hair as he climbed the hill towards the hut, silently wondering what it was about the Fire mage and his love of places away from Magnoliaâ€¦half the time it seemed as though he wanted to be away from people, even though the rest of the time he was one of the most social people in the guild. Shoving that thought aside he focused on the Fire mage as he drew closer, something heavy settling in his stomach as he caught sight of the tears cascading down Natsu's cheeks as he worked on creating a pile of small rocksâ€¦he would never admit it aloud, but he had a weakness for the other's tearsâ€¦and he swallowed nervously before calling out to Natsu, worried that the Dragon-slayer didn't seem aware of his presence.

"_Natsu?!"_

"_Go awayâ€¦_" Natsu voice was rough from crying, and he seemed to curl in on himself before slowly turning to look at the Ice mage. Gray felt he'd been kicked in the gut as he stared at his supposed rival, the pain written across the other boy's face killing all hope that he was okayâ€¦that he was dealing with what was going on, and the Ice mage took a tentative step forward even as he protested the command._

"_Butâ€¦_"I can't leave you like thisâ€¦idiotâ€¦_

"_I don't want to see anyone right now," Natsu whispered, holding his gaze for a moment before turning his gaze back to the rocks, which

Gray only now realised was slowly being shaped into a memorial. The Fire mage rested a shaking hand against the top one, before adding softly. "I don't trust myself at the momentâ€¦and I can't lose any more friends." _

Gray had wanted to point out that he wasn't going to lose anyone elseâ€¦at least not through anything he was going to do. But there had been something in Natsu's expression that had stopped him, and after a few moments he had retreatedâ€¦hating the fact that his rival had looked so broken, and that he didn't know how to help him. _I didn't know what to do thenâ€¦and I'm not any closer right nowâ€¦what the hell am I supposed to do?_

"But you want to?" Erza asked, the oddly gentle tone drawing him out of his thoughts and she smiled at him when she saw the confusion on his face, silently wondering what he had been remembering that could have put such a lost expression on his face a few moments again. "Cheer him up I mean."

"Yes." _I just don't know howâ€¦_

"Do something nice for him," Erza suggested as she glanced across at Natsu once more, noting that all traces of humour had faded from his face although it was clear that he was trying to stay involved in the conversation over then, and she sighed before adding quietly. "It might not make him smile or laugh, but I think he needs to be reminded that the rest of us are still here."

"Butâ€¦"

"Lisanna," Erza hesitated for a moment, noting the slight flinch that went through the Ice mage, and feeling the same pain herself before forcing herself to continue quietly, hoping that Natsu was suitably distracted not to be able to hear what they were saying. "Lisanna wouldn't want him to forget thatâ€¦and I'm sure she'd agree with me, that he's more likely to listen if it comes from you."

"From me?" Gray couldn't keep the doubt out of his voice, feeling the need to point out one of the more obvious reasons why it wouldn't work. "But we'reâ€¦rivals."

"Yes," Erza agreed with a slight quirk of her lips, noting the hint of dismay in his voice as he said the last bit. "But you're more than that. If you weren't then you wouldn't be sat here worrying about him, trying to think of ways to cheer him up."

"Iâ€¦"

"You don't have to admit it aloud," she reassured him quickly, well aware that the Ice mage had never been good about expressing those kind of feelings after losing so many people that were dear to him. It was another reason why she knew that he was the one that Natsu would listen toâ€¦they shared the same pain, and they were both far more familiar in the ways they reacted to that kind of hurt than either of them would ever admit to.

Something niceâ€¦ Gray frowned as he wracked his brain for something that he could do, finding it hard to focus between the relief that she wasn't making him say that they were 'friends' aloud, and the fact that she seemed to have so much faith in his ability to

help the Dragon-slayer. However, inspiration struck a few minutes later as he watched Happy quietly making his way across to Natsu with lunch for them both, only to watch Natsu quietly pushing the food aside nearly straight away, shaking his head at whatever the clearly unhappy cat was saying to him. That was something they'd all noticed beforeâ€|that the Dragon-slayer had lost his once infamous appetite, and he felt fresh concern welling up at the reminder, along with a flash of inspiration and with a determined expression he turned back to the Requip mage.

"Erza will you help me?"

FTFT

That evening:

Natsu sighed as he made his way up the path to Gray's flat, wondering what on earth the Ice mage wanted him. He had been suspicious when Erza had passed on the message that he was to be here for five, but he had brushed it aside, well aware that she wouldn't help Gray do anything that would result in them fightingâ€|not that they had fought in a whileâ€|However, his suspicions had returned when she had handed him a box when he was leaving the guild, with strict orders not to open it until after he had seen Gray, the dark glare that had accompanied that command making sure that he obeyed even when she wasn't around to enforce it. Still he was curiousâ€|especially as he could catch the delicious aroma rising from the box, making his mouth water slightly and his stomach rumbleâ€|he hadn't been eating much recently, but whatever was inside the box seemed to be overriding that reluctance. Still he refrained from peeking.

Shifting the box into one hand he was about to knock on the door when he spotted the note that had been stuck to the wall, it took him a moment to decipher the scrawled writing, his eyebrows rising when he realised it was telling him to let himself in. _What the hell is going on?_ He could probably count on the hand the number of times he had been to the Ice mage's flat, and the one time he had tried to sneak in, he'd ended up with a bloody nose for his troubles. Still, he couldn't deny that he was curious so with a sigh he reached for the door and let himself in, stiffening as he caught the scent of smoke in the air as soon as he'd closed the door.

"Gray?!" Abandoning the box on the hall table he followed the smell of smoke through to the kitchen, only to find himself coming to a halt in the doorway, blinking as he tried to make sense of what was going on in front of his eyes.

FT

Gray was ready to cry as he gazed around at the state of his kitchen, barely aware of the fact that he was completely covered in the food that he had been trying to make. Normally he was fine cooking, admittedly sticking to fairly simple things because he didn't see the point of wasting too much time on something that was going to be gone in minutes, but it seemed as though everything had gone wrong from the moment he'd started today. Part of him knew that it was down to a mix of nervousness and anticipationâ€|he had never cooked for Natsu before, and with the way that the Dragon-slayer was acting he had no idea how this idea was going to go downâ€|and then there was the fact that Erza had both wished him luck and told him to do his best. But

there had been more than a little bad luck mixed in—he'd dropped stuff, burnt stuff and even managed to concoct a sauce that smelt somewhat like a Vulcan. _I screwed it up._ _I wanted this to go right...I needed this to go right... but—_

"Damn it," He muttered, rubbing a hand over his face and grimacing when it came away covered in flour and what looked to be part of the sauce he'd tried to make for Natsu's fire chicken. _I should have stuck to something simple—_ Deep down he had known that he was being ambitious, but he had wanted it to be something special and not just a slapped together meal that took minutes to make.

Now though he was out of time and ingredients. His kitchen was a mess, and he wrinkled his nose as he realised that the air was filled with the lingering smell of smoke. _There's no way I'm going to be able to hide this, and Natsu's going to be here soon._ He paled at the thought of Natsu turning up to this—there was no way this was going to cheer him up. If anything it was more than likely going to get the Dragon-slayer to punch him for making him waste his time, and his expression crumpled at the thought. He hadn't been able to say it to Erza, but the thought that they were more than rivals—and that even other people had been able to notice that, had warmed him, and he didn't want to go back to being mere rivals.

_What the hell am I going to do? _

FT

Natsu blinked, then blinked again and yet the image in front of him didn't change in the slightest, and he found himself unable to look away. Gray was stood in the middle of what appeared to be a bombsite, both himself and the kitchen completely covered in what appeared to be the entire contents of his cupboards and fridge, the air filled with smoke and the smell of burnt food, and something that smelled completely inedible and he fought not to wrinkle his nose. _What was he trying to do?_ Finally managing to find his voice he took a cautious step into the kitchen.

"What the—?"

"Natsu—" Gray whirled around so quickly that Natsu was surprised he didn't give himself whiplash, dark eyes widening as he took in the Dragon-slayer. Natsu felt any urge he might have had to tease him dying as he took in the look of shame and slight blush that appeared a moment later.

"What happened?"

"I—" Gray swallowed nervously, not sure what to make of the odd expression on the Dragon-slayer's face and cursing himself for leaving the note to tell Natsu to let himself in. Seeing the expectant look in the olive eyes he sighed and gestured around the mess that was his kitchen. "I was trying to cook dinner—"

"For me?" Natsu tilted his head to one side in confusion as he studied the Ice mage, unable to recall Gray even offering to do that for him before, let alone putting in this amount of effort. _Although how he managed to make this much mess—_. The Ice mage nodded silently, and Natsu blinked before asking quietly. "Why?"

"Iâ€|" Gray could feel himself growing redder, but he gathered up his courage. He'd screwed up the meal, but he was determined to at least try and make some of his plan work, and for that he was going to be honest. "I wanted to cheer you upâ€|you haven't laughed recentlyâ€|and your smile never reaches your eyes, and Iâ€|I miss you." If he hadn't been red before, he certainly was by the end of his rambling explanation and he glanced down at the floor, unable to hold Natsu's gaze any longer as he waited for the Dragon-slayer to either growl at him or punch him.

Natsu could only gape at the Ice mage for a moment, his thoughts racing even as an odd warmth blossomed in his chest. _This was all for meâ€|?_ He knew that he hadn't been acting like himself recently, but he hadn't been able to get himself out of his funk and he'd started to think that no one had noticedâ€|and yet here was Gray saying that not only had he noticed, but that it had bothered him and he'd wanted to do something about it. _I thought we were rivalsâ€|_There was a burning in his eyes and he squeezed them shut for a moment, before reopening to find that Gray was still gazing at the floor as though it was the most interesting thing in the world. But what really caught his attention was how red the other teen was, it had even spread to the tips of his ears. _Grayâ€|_

Slowly he let his gaze trail around the kitchen, the mess taking on a fresh meaning now that he knew the motivation behind it and the warmth in his chest grew, and he felt his lips quirk slightly. Shifting his attention back to Gray he opened his mouth, trying to think of what to say, when the Ice mage startled him by lifting his head to look at him, and whatever words he'd been about to say died in his throat. Gray was bright red, his face streaked with flour and sauce and goodness knows what, and the rest of him wasn't much better. Natsu's lips quivered again, drinking in the sight and trying to ignore the small voice that was whispering _'cute'_ in the back of his mind. The restraint that had been holding back his amusement snapped a moment later when Gray shifted slightly, sending a cloud of flour into the air around his face, and immediately breaking into a sneezing fit.

There was no stopping it now, and he doubled over as laughter bubbled up. It was too muchâ€|. the mess, the blushing, the sneezingâ€|Tears began to trickle down his cheeks as he wrapped his arms around himself, but these were different tears to the ones that had haunted him for the past few months, and he felt a weight lifting from his shoulders even as the warmth continued to spread. _He's an idiot, but he did this for meâ€|all this was for meâ€|_

It took him a few minutes to get himself back under control, and even then the odd giggle kept breaking free as he slowly straightened. Coming up short as he found that Gray was stood there, staring wide-eyed at him and he was startled to see tears in the Ice mage's eyes as he whispered faintly.

"You laughedâ€|"

"Idiot," Natsu muttered, feeling his own cheeks heating up under the others gaze. Unable to think of something to say that would properly express how much this meant to him, he darted across the gap between them and flung his arms around the startled Ice mage, ignoring Gray's worried protests that he was going to get messy too. "Thank youâ€|Thank youâ€|Thank youâ€|" He chanted softly as he buried his

face against the taller teen's chest, feeling the warmth turning into an inferno as cool arms crept up to wrap around him in return as Gray's head dropped to rest against his.

"You're welcome!"

FTFT

Omake:

"Sorry I ruined dinner," Gray muttered once they were both showered, with Natsu currently wearing some of his clothes whilst their messy ones were in the washing machine. The kitchen was back in some semblance of order. He had adamantly refused to let Natsu tidy it all up, pointing out that he was the idiot that had made the mess when the Dragon-slayer had pouted at his refusal, although he had given way slightly and allowed him to help get the worst of it done. Now they had both retreated to the living room to decide what they were going to do about food, as Gray was fairly sure that there wasn't an edible crumb left in the house.

"It's okay," Natsu reassured him, before pausing for a moment as comprehension dawned and he shot to his feet a moment later with grin. "Wait here." The Ice mage wasn't given a chance to respond as the Dragon-slayer had already darted out of the room before it had even registered that he was up and moving, and by the time he had opened his mouth to reply, the Fire mage came bustling back into the room with the box that Erza had given him. Shooting Gray an amused look he set the box down with a flourish before reclaiming his seat next to him.

"What's this?" Gray asked.

"Erza gave it to me," Natsu replied, gesturing for the Ice mage to open it, which Gray did with a somewhat hesitant expression, only to sit back with a conflicted expression as he took in the tubs of food inside and the slices of cake on the top. The Dragon-slayer had lent in to see, and he chuckled as he took in the food as it confirmed his suspicions, and his expression softened as he glanced at Gray and took in the sulky expression on the other teen's face. "I think she had an idea about what was going to happen!"

"Looks like it," Gray said finally, realising that he couldn't actually be mad at the redhead, and his pout disappeared as he offered Natsu a smile. "At least we get to eat dinner together after all!"

"Yeah," Natsu agreed eagerly, before pausing and staring down at the cake on the top, realising that it was some of Erza's favourite and the earlier warmth blazed brightly once more as he reverently lifted it out. "I can't believe she actually gave us cake!"

FTFT

End
file.